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Pam Kilgallon

Edith Cowan University

Carmel Maloney

Edith Cowan University

Graeme Lock

Edith Cowan University

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EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS' SUSTAINMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

Pam Kilgallon
Carmel Maloney
Graeme Lock
Edith Cowan University

Abstract: This paper describes an investigation of Australian early childhood teachers' sustainment in their profession, focussing on those factors which enhance professional commitment, job satisfaction and occupational motivation. Utilizing qualitative methodology this study also identified key factors early childhood teachers consider crucial to sustaining engagement in teaching, while coping with the daily demands of their work and the implementation of mandated educational change. In particular, this study found early childhood teachers' students, work colleagues, educational setting and attitudes, beliefs and pedagogical practice contributed to their sustainment, as did their ability to maintain personal well-being and a life-work balance.

Introduction

The teaching profession is constantly undergoing scrutiny and is the focus of continuous change. As societies alter so too do the demands made upon educational bodies and those working within those systems. In Australian educational organizations, reforms to education policy and practice are commonplace. Teachers are regularly challenged in their teaching roles to review their beliefs and practices in order to implement imposed educational change while continuing to deliver quality education to their students (Fleet & Patterson, 2003; Hargreaves, Lieberman, Fullan, & Hopkins, 1998).

An ageing trend across the Australian teaching profession has been recorded and widely reported (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003; Department of Education and Training, 2002a). Research also reveals that up to 30% of novice teachers are leaving the profession within the first 5 years of teaching, and that those remaining within the profession experience difficulties in coping with the pressures of work (Department of Education and Training, 2002b; Lokan, 2003; Preston, 2001; Wilhelm, Dewhurst-Savellis, & Parker, 2000). Increasing levels of teacher job dissatisfaction, stress, burnout and attrition have also been reported (Institute for the Service Professions, 2005; Labone, 2002; Wilhelm et al., 2000). Evidence suggests that factors such as teachers' workload, lack of administrative support, conditions of employment and a perceived lowered social status of the profession contribute to a decline in teacher wellbeing and retention (Danielson, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Department of Education and Training, 2003a; Institute for the Service Professions, 2005; Stamopoulos, 1998; Wilhelm et al., 2000). In addition, teachers' attitudes and dispositions are also considered to impact on teachers' stress levels and capacity to cope with their work (Friedman, 2000; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999; Wilhelm et al., 2000). Such studies indicate that teachers in all sectors of the profession, including early childhood

educators, are challenged in their teaching roles and ability to maintain professional commitment and personal well-being.

Recent years have also seen a growing interest in early childhood education, with research highlighting the importance of early learning on later development (Mustard & McCain, 1999; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart, 2002). In Australia, the increased provision of pre-compulsory placements of 3 and 4 year old students within formal education settings has broadened the impact of early childhood education on Australian children and contributed to a redefinition of the roles of early childhood educators working in Australian education systems (Department of Education and Training, 2006b; Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision, 2006).

Early childhood educators have also been exposed to changes in accountability requirements and teaching practices. A plethora of educational philosophies and practices relating to early childhood practice exist (MacNaughton & Williams, 2004). To continue to be effective in their teaching practice, early childhood teachers are expected to keep abreast of what constitutes best teaching practice and implement what they consider is appropriate in their particular educational setting (Department of Education and Training, 2003b). In Western Australia, practices such as the implementation of outcomes-focussed learning, the early literacy debate and the inclusion of students with special needs into early childhood settings are some of the issues which have impacted on the nature of early childhood teachers' work (Department of Education and Training, 2003b; Kilgallon & Maloney, 2003).

While research has examined teachers' continuance and ongoing engagement in teaching, those involved in investigations have either been teachers working at a primary level (Patterson, Collins, & Abbott, 2004; Stanford, 2001), secondary level (Eick, 2002; Louden, 1991; Milner, 2002), or teachers who have pursued promotional or non-teaching positions and are no longer working in the classroom (Kashatus, 2003; Robison, 2001). Of the few studies investigating early childhood teachers' work (Mc Clean, 1991; Yonemura, 1986), the emphasis has been on children's learning and teacher reflection. A review of Australian early childhood research conducted between 1993 and 2000 (Fleer, 2000), also found that research had concentrated on substantiating the relevance of early childhood education and the long term impacts on children's learning, rather than examining early childhood teachers' continuance in their teaching roles. In an attempt to address this discrepancy, this study concentrated on examining the sustainment of early childhood teachers: factors that influenced their ability to remain actively engaged in the profession and in the craft of teaching, over the course of their professional lives.

While other studies have used the terms *teacher resilience* (Howard & Johnson, 2004, p. 399; Patterson et al., 2004, p. 3) and *teacher persistence* (Stanford, 2001, p. 75), in this study *teacher sustainment* is the preferred term. As *sustainment* relates to the ability to keep going in the performance of a process (*Dictionary.com Unabridged (v1.1)*, 2006), this definition fits with the purpose of this investigation. Furthermore, the term *teacher sustainment* has previously been applied in educational studies when investigating teacher job satisfaction, well-being and continuance in teaching (Holloway, 2003, p. 87; Houghton, 2001, p. 706; Lokan, 2003, p.1). While resilience and persistence also imply endurance, such terms are seen to be strengths or traits of a person's character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and, as such, may be considered as potential factors contributing to a teacher's continuance in teaching. As this study's purpose was to investigate the range of factors impacting on early childhood teachers' active engagement and continuance in their profession *teacher sustainment* is the chosen term.

The study sought to answer the following questions: What factors contribute to early childhood teachers being sustained in their profession? What factors contribute to early childhood teachers sustaining effective engagement in their daily teaching practice?

Methodology and Analysis

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology, namely descriptive surveys, in-depth interviews and focus groups, was used in this study to gather data pertaining to teacher sustainment, as such approaches are considered suited to examining how individuals make sense of their world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative approaches have been applied in educational research to investigate teachers' beliefs and how teachers operate in their educational settings (Somekh & Lewin, 2005; Wellington, 2000), in keeping with the purpose of this study. In particular, descriptive surveys and focus groups are deemed appropriate to illicit unrestricted and descriptive responses from a small number, or distinct group of participants (Burns, 1998; Litosseliti, 2003), as was the case in this study. In addition, in-depth semi-structured interviews contribute to a deeper understanding of a chosen phenomena, where the immediacy of the interview process facilitates clarification of participant responses, reinforcing the validity of the study (Grbich, 1999). In this study, a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to develop case studies of six early childhood teachers, selected on the basis that they had taught for more than 20 years and were still engaged in classroom teaching. In addition, these participants held promotional positions with their employer (Department of Education and Training of Western Australia) and were known to be actively engaged in the profession, belonging to either the Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA), Early Years in Education Society (EYES) or Early Childhood Teachers' Association (ECTA). While not a form of data collection, case studies were employed in this investigation to illustrate unique issues related to teaching (Burns, 1998; Stake, 2000), providing an insight into the sustainment of individual early childhood teachers over the course of their professional lives.

Phases of Data Collection

The study was conducted in two phases. Phase one comprised of an open-ended questionnaire survey and focus groups involving 57 early childhood teachers of kindergarten to year 1 level students, while phase two included a series of in-depth interviews used to compile the six case studies. All participants were asked to recount key factors which impacted on their sustainment of professional commitment, job satisfaction, occupational motivation, their effective teaching practice and ability to cope with the daily demands of their work and educational change: traits identified in the literature as being associated with continuance in teaching and the profession (Lokan, 2003; Shann, 1998; Woods & Weasmer, 2002). Participants were also asked to recount positive or negative experiences that impacted on their sustainment in teaching. Furthermore, participants in each focus group session indicated the degree of commonality held for each expressed comment regarding factors that contributed to their sustainment. In addition, case study participants described their teaching careers, educational beliefs and pedagogical practices and significant influences on their continuation in teaching.

Data Analysis

In keeping with qualitative research practice (Grbich, 1999), survey forms and transcripts were individually analysed to identify key words and themes that described participants' perceptions of sustainment. For ease of comparison, all data derived from the research were collated under headings, based on the traits covered in the open-ended questions of the survey: professional commitment, job satisfaction, occupational motivation, effective

teaching practice, coping with the daily demands of teaching, coping with educational change and significant experiences of sustainment in teaching.

Factors identified from the first phase of data collection, the surveys and focus groups, were grouped together and tabled, identifying the percentage of participants who shared those beliefs. Comments that reflected participants' personal beliefs were also recorded to elaborate on commonalities and discrepancies between participants' responses. Data from the second phase of data collection, the case study transcripts, were similarly analysed for key words and themes indicating factors that impacted on participants' sustainment in the profession and in teaching. Further triangulation was undertaken by returning transcripts and individual summaries of factors impacting on their sustainment to each case study participant for their verification.

Participants

Sixty three early childhood teachers (educators in school settings working with children aged 3 to 8 years), comprising of 61 female and 2 male teachers from two northern metropolitan Western Australian Department of Education and Training (DET) school districts participated in the study. The low number of males (3%) participating was acknowledged as a limitation of the study. However, as less than 1% of all early childhood educators working in the West Australian education system are male (Department of Education and Training, 2006a), the likelihood of male teachers participating in early childhood research such as this study was low.

In the first phase of data collection, 227 early childhood teachers were approached in 2004 and invited to participate in either an open-ended question survey or one of four focus group interview sessions, conducted at large schools (classified as Level 6 by DET) within the two districts and using the same questions as in the survey. In total, 57 early childhood teachers participated in the first phase of data collection, 34 participants, including the 2 male early childhood teachers completed the survey and a further 23 participated in the focus group sessions.

In addition, six early childhood teachers participated in the case study phase of data collection (second phase of data collection) in the second half of 2004. Prospective participants were nominated by four senior early childhood lecturers working at the local university and two early childhood curriculum officers based at the two DET district offices, on the basis that they had taught for more than 20 years and were recognized within the profession as being long serving and highly effective teachers in the field of early childhood education. From a prospective pool of 12 participants, six early childhood teachers agreed to be part of the second phase of data collection. Case study participants were involved in a series of five in-depth semi-structured interviews where they recounted their professional lives, pedagogical beliefs and practice, as well as responding to the survey questions. In all, 63 early childhood educators participated in this study.

Findings and Discussion

Although this study was not statistically based, percentages of the first phase participants' responses are included in the discussion to demonstrate the degree of accord held amongst participants as to what are the key factors of sustainment. Further to this, comments made by case study and first phase participants are included (denoted in double quotation marks) to demonstrate how such factors impacted on their sustainment in teaching and the profession.

Participants in this study nominated several factors as to what sustained each of the traits associated with teaching and professionalism, indicating that multiple, rather than singular factors determined their continuance in teaching. Furthermore, even though participants were able to nominate their own sustaining factors, in contrast to other studies where teachers rated pre-determined factors (Department of Education and Training, 2003a; Lokan, 2003; Woods & Weasmer, 2002), the findings revealed that many held shared beliefs as to what factors are crucial to their sustainment in teaching and in the profession. The early childhood teachers participating in both phases of this study indicated that common key factors impacting on their sustainment in the profession, and in teaching, included their students, work colleagues, types of support received and the early childhood work environment. In addition, participants revealed that their pedagogical practices also influenced their sustainment, as did their attitudes, beliefs and personal health and well-being.

Students

Enjoyment of working with young children and “making a difference to students’ lives” were sustaining factors for 67.3% of the first phase participants and all of the case study participants. For these early childhood teachers the relationships they developed with students were perceived to sustain their job satisfaction (61.4%), occupational motivation (35.1%), professional commitment (80.7%) and effective teaching practice (24.6%). Similar findings have also been reported in other studies (Department of Education and Training, 2003a; Lokan, 2003; Patterson et al., 2004; Stanford, 2001). What was significant in this study, however, was that participants were able to describe those traits that made their students a source of sustainment, including their “enthusiasm for learning”, their “innocence” and “spontaneity”, their “sense of humour” and their “youth.” One case study participant, Grace (pseudonym), describing how her students sustained her job satisfaction, commented,

As soon as you walk in the room, all your worries leave you behind. It’s just the joy, the honesty of working with them, with young children. What they say, the humour, the fun, the laughter they give... That’s the joy of it all. It’s being with the children. They make it all worthwhile when you do things for them. The enjoyment of what they get from what you’ve prepared for them. (Grace, 30/08/04).

In addition, participants commented on being in the exclusive position of being able to observe the significant progress their students made in the first years of their academic lives. As one case study participant, Mel (pseudonym), stated,

I really enjoy working with the very young children because you can see the difference that what you do makes... With younger children you can see the response. So I like working with the year ones, because they come in not reading and they go out with some development in that area. (Mel, 27/09/04).

For 31.6% of first phase participants, the ability to observe the “difference they made to students’ lives” was a factor sustaining their professional commitment. Five of the six case study participants also elaborated on how interest in their students motivated them to actively seek new ideas and stimulation to meet the needs of their students. As one case study participant, Hilary (pseudonym) recounted, “I want to take them (the children) as far as they can go! My challenge is to know them (the children), to see here they are and to take them as far as they can go!” (Hilary, 29/10/04).

The ability to enjoy the company of those you interact with on a daily basis appears to be a key factor contributing to participating teachers’ sustainment in the classroom, a finding also identified in previous research (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Steca, 2003; Lokan, 2003). Clearly, an aptitude towards working with young children should be considered a

desirable character trait for those entering the teaching profession, if they are to sustain job satisfaction and remain engaged in their teaching roles.

Work Colleagues and Professional Peers

In this study 52.2% of first-phase participants also revealed that the relationships they developed with work colleagues and professional peers were crucial to their sustainment. In particular, these relationships influenced their job satisfaction (73.7%), effective teaching practice (71.9%), professional commitment (33.3%), occupational motivation (29.8%) and ability to cope with the implementation of mandated educational change (36.8%). Furthermore, the full-time support of an education assistant, a feature of West Australian early childhood settings, enhanced 63.1% first-phase participants' ability to cope with the daily demands of their work. Four of the case study participants were also able to describe how they were sustained through the support of an education assistant, sharing teaching duties and receiving emotional, physical and social support on a daily basis. Comments made by case study participants included, "I have terrific people that I work with, that we can talk about things. And there will be times when people challenge you... and you need to be able to talk about some of these things" (Hilary, 29/10/04), and, "We have a good time. And that's why I like it, and I think early childhood is sustaining as well, is because you have a relationship with an assistant. You've got somebody there with you all the time." (Rachel, 2/07/04). For these teachers, this feature of early childhood education proved to be a key sustaining factor.

Furthermore, five of the six case study participants recounted critical teaching incidents where through developing a mentor relationship with a professional peer they were sustained in their teaching pedagogy and practice. Mentorship also led these teachers to extend their active engagement in the profession, beyond the classroom. One participant, Rachel (pseudonym) described how her relationship with a work colleague resulted in them conducting workshops for other early childhood educators,

We had the same philosophies, the same ideas and she's the same sort of person, that's interested in education. She reads a lot. We discuss a lot and together we've developed our ideas...And I don't think either of us would have gone into doing workshops, if it hadn't been for the fact that we were both doing it together and bouncing off (sic) each other. (Rachel, 2/07/04).

While research has identified work relationships as contributing to job satisfaction (Lokan, 2003; Scott, Cox, & Dinham, 1999) and coping with the implementation of educational change (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001), previous studies have not indicated that work-relationships also contribute to teacher sustainment. This study revealed that West Australian early childhood teachers are in a unique position, benefiting from having ongoing support in the form of education assistants. Receiving support on a daily basis, in this study, also appears to contribute to early childhood teachers being sustained in their job satisfaction, occupational motivation and ability to cope with the daily demands associated with their work.

Sources of Support

In addition to work colleagues and professional peers providing a source of support, participants in this study also indicated that, according to their personal preferences, they accessed more than one source of support, including parents, line managers, professional resources and families and friends.

In particular, first phase participants indicated that the support they received from parents contributed to sustaining their job satisfaction (22.8%), professional commitment (19.3%) and occupational motivation (19.3%). Several participants, including 17.5% first-phase participants and three case study participants, recounted critical teaching incidents either involving disruptive students or concerns regarding their teaching style, where they were sustained in their practice by the support and encouragement of parents. For these teachers, often the first “point of contact” parents have with the formal education system, harmonious relationships with parents contributed to their sustainment in teaching.

School administration and line managers also influenced first-phase participants sustaining job satisfaction (19.3%), effective teaching practice (14%) and coping with the implementation of educational change (10.5%). Participants, however, did not indicate that organizational or line manager support contributed to their coping with the daily demands of their work. Rather, each of the case study participants were able to describe how line managers indirectly influenced their sustainment by facilitating their attendance at professional development sessions and, in three instances, demonstrating empathy for early childhood educational practices. As one participant, Barbara (pseudonym), recounted,

I was really encouraged to have a go. To really build up my expertise and I went on as many PD's (professional development sessions) I could find and were interested in. Especially from coming from the country to here (suburban location). You think 'Wow!' It was all available. I was quite enthused in that! (Barbara, 12/05/04).

Accessing professional resources, a strategy recommended by Australian educational bodies (Committee for the Review of Teaching and Teacher Education, 2003; Department of Education and Training, 2003b) also provided participants with both intellectual stimulation and a means of keeping informed of current trends and practices. First-phase participants disclosed that they either attended professional development sessions or referred to written resources to sustain their teaching practice (52.6%) and cope with the implementation of mandated educational change (24.5%). In contrast, all of the case study participants indicated a preference for reading quality educational literature or affiliating with early childhood professional associations where they could gain support from like-minded professionals. Comments included, “Reading articles I slowly developed a keen understanding about how important these things (educational change) are and the quality you get from them” (Grace, 9/08/04), and,

I do that (sustain professional commitment) by going to conferences and being part of the EYES (Early Years in Education Society) committee. And so, that really gives me much more access to educational research and ideas, than if I'd just attended conferences. (Gwen, 21/06/04).

First-phase participants (24.6%) also referred to how “having a life outside of teaching” influenced their continuance in teaching. Case study participants made similar responses. Social and familial sources provided these teachers with emotional support, a finding supported by prior research (Gold & Roth, 1993; Howard & Johnson, 2004), enabling them to keep work-related issues in perspective. Further to this, case study participants indicated that support from sources outside of the profession, in particular family and friends, enhanced their ability to maintain a life-work balance, a factor crucial to their sustainment in early childhood education. In this study, the ability to access support from a range of sources appears to contribute to early childhood teachers’ continuance in teaching and in the profession.

The Early Childhood Work Environment

Pragmatic reasons for their continuance in teaching were also cited by the study’s participants, such as the need for an income, the work hours and school holidays, factors

previously attributed to job dissatisfaction and attrition (Danielson, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2003). In this study, 47.4% of first-phase participants, the vast majority being female, revealed that their work conditions were suited to familial commitments and facilitated their sustaining a life-work balance.

In addition, first-phase participants described how their particular work environments, often set apart from other educational services, afforded them a degree of professional autonomy which contributed to their job satisfaction (26.3%), professional commitment (31.6%) and occupational motivation (42.1%), as well as ability to cope with the daily demands of their work (17.5%). Participants from both phases of data collection commented on how they had the “freedom” to vary their timetable, trial different teaching practices and make their own decisions regarding purchase of resources. Case study participants commented “I go with the flow with the kids (sic).” (Rachel, 18/06/04), “I keep creating new things all the time to work with the children, looking for new ideas of what to do.” (Grace, 30/08/04) and “I really like that we had our own resources, all latched up (sic) to early childhood” (Gwen, 20/05/04). Furthermore, three case study participants found that, in working in a profession where their qualifications were recognized nationally and internationally, they were able to change work positions and locations, factors that had influenced their sustaining job satisfaction and occupational motivation over the course of their teaching careers. For these teachers, working in the early childhood environment contributed to their sense of empowerment, sustained through their capacity to implement flexibility and variety in their daily teaching practice and professional lives.

These findings indicate that for many early childhood teachers working in an environment where they are afforded a degree of autonomy, while meeting familial and financial commitments, is a strong motivation to remain in teaching. Other studies have also identified a link between working conditions and teachers’ job satisfaction and occupational motivation (Lokan, 2003; Shann, 1998), indicating that teaching can be a fulfilling and sustaining profession.

Early Childhood Teachers’ Pedagogical Practices

In coping with the daily demands of their work, 28.1% of first-phase participants and all of the case study participants identified organizational strategies as being vital to their maintaining effective teaching practice. Use of routines, streamlining planning and rationalizing and prioritising the implementation of educational change were some of the strategies nominated as contributing to participants’ sustainment in teaching. All of the case study participants also indicated how their strong pedagogical knowledge enabled them to be prepared in advance and have the confidence to be flexible in their daily teaching practice. As one participant, Mel (pseudonym) explained

Being organized, and that means everything from your planning through to your records and resources...Having that sense of, you've got the planning but you're prepared to move away from it. So you're prepared to be flexible... so flexibility is only there because you've got that planning and you know how to link things in.
(Mel, 27/09/04).

In addition, strength of belief and sound pedagogical knowledge, traits associated with a strong self-efficacy, that is “belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1977, p.3), enabled these teachers to persevere in their teaching careers. One participant reflected that “You need to have a strong belief in what you’re doing” (Rachel, 11/06/04), when recounting how her beliefs sustained her professional commitment, coping with educational change and continuance in the classroom.

Furthermore, four case study participants described how they devoted part of their day, outside of school hours, to engage in reflective thinking, finding that “You always need to constantly self-reflect on what you’re doing otherwise you won’t improve or change anything that you’re doing” (Grace, 13/09/04). Reflective thinking facilitated these teachers identifying student needs, developing realistic expectations and modifying their teaching practices, at the same time enhancing their ability to be flexible, effective and sustained in their teaching practice. In addition, reflective thinking facilitated several participants coping with the implementation of educational changes, being able to “pick the eyes out of it (sic),” (Barbara, 12/05/04) and identify the benefits and practicalities of proposed changes. As one participant explained,

I’ll look at it for a while. I don’t take it on straight away though, when some things are introduced. I’ll look and I’ll think about it for a while...And if I can draw a visual picture then I’ll start to give it a go! (Grace, 30/08/04).

While self-efficacy has been linked to teacher job satisfaction and effective teaching practice (Bandura, 1997; Caprara et al., 2003), this study indicates that self-efficacy is also a factor contributing to teacher sustainment. Furthermore, this study supports previous research identifying reflective thinking as a tool to develop effective teaching practice (Day, 1999; Moore, 2001; Schon, 1987). This study, however, also indicates that engaging in reflective teaching practices has the potential to assist teachers in coping with educational change and sustainment in the classroom.

Early Childhood Teachers’ Attitudes and Beliefs

Traits traditionally associated with effective early childhood teachers (Hare, 1993; McClean, 1991; Ryan & Cooper, 2000) were also found to impact on participants’ sustainment. In both phases of the study participants described how their positive attitudes, caring dispositions and empathy for teaching young children influenced their sustainment. Altruistic beliefs of wanting to “make a difference to students’ lives” were influential in sustaining 31.8% of first-phase participants’ professional commitment. Possessing “a sense of humour”, a character trait identified as contributing to job satisfaction (Lokan, 2003), also facilitated 33.3% first-phase participants placing daily concerns into perspective. Furthermore, “being positive” and “willing to have a go” empowered 45.6% first-phase participants to cope with the implementation of mandated educational change. First participants (28.1%) also revealed how self-awareness, a component of their emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1998), led them to develop realistic expectations of their limitations and enhanced their ability to rationalize and prioritize their workload. In addition, case study participants described how their beliefs in early childhood education and adherence to particular educational philosophies, contributed to their sustainment both on a daily basis and during critical teaching incidences. Comments included, “I always focus on the positive” (Hilary, 29/10/04), “I’m confident in what I believe and I believe I’m confident in following what I believe” (Rachel, 9/07/04), and,

I never taught the same as other people. And sometimes I used to think that I must be doing it wrong, but then I realised, no, I wasn’t doing it wrong. I was doing it my way, and I was doing it the way I thought was the best way. (Gwen, 20/05/04).

In this study, not only did traits associated with a strong emotional intelligence practice (Goleman, 1998) contribute to participants remaining motivated and committed to the profession, but strength of conviction and intrinsic motivation reinforced these teachers’ abilities to be resilient and persevere, traits identified as character strengths or traits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Consequently, for many of the participants in this study, their personal characteristics also contributed to their ability to be sustained in teaching and the profession.

Personal Health and Well-Being

In order to cope with the daily demands of their work participants also indicated that maintaining personal health and well-being was important. A balanced diet, as well as adequate rest and exercise, were considered sustaining factors by 33.3% of first-phase participants and all of the case study participants. Case study participants were able to relate how they valued holiday entitlements and took necessary breaks from work or made adjustments to their work practices to accommodate personal health issues. For instance, one participant, suffering from a back injury, had a modified chair for use in the classroom, while another ensured she engaged in physical activity in out-of-school hours to maintain physically and mentally able to cope with the demands of her work. Several teachers also commented on how personal issues impacted on their level of engagement and teaching performance. Furthermore, these teachers found that their levels of productive engagement in the profession fluctuated over the course of their careers as they strove to maintain a balance between meeting personal commitments and professional responsibilities. One case study participant, reflecting on her sustainment in teaching, commented,

I think its about balance...So, I think sustainability is being able to give your best, but realise you are a human being and you have lots of different facets, which if you look after them, will benefit your teaching anyway. (Barbara, 3/06/04).

While research into teacher job dissatisfaction, stress and burnout (Darling-Hammond, 2003; Department of Education and Training, 2002b; Institute for the Service Professions, 2005) has focussed on work-related factors impacting on teacher performance and continuance in teaching, this study has identified that teachers' personal health and wellbeing also have the propensity to impact on continuance in teaching. In this study, early childhood teachers revealed that their self-awareness and ability to accommodate personal health-related issues contributed to their sustainment in the classroom.

Conclusion

In light of reported trends depicting the teaching profession to be disillusioned, demoralised and in a state of crisis, this study highlights the positive aspects of teaching early childhood students by those working within the profession. The study revealed that key factors exist that can have a significant impact on the degree to which early childhood teachers remain committed to their profession, value what they do, and the extent to which they feel rewarded for their efforts.

Experienced early childhood teachers in this study indicated that their self-awareness, realistic expectations and the ability to be organized and flexible facilitated their maintaining a life-work balance and being sustained in the profession. Awareness and enhancement of those factors which reinforced their job satisfaction, occupational motivation and professional commitment, appeared to be a successful strategy employed by these teachers to enhance their sustainment in teaching. In particular, participants in this study promoted opportunities where they could interact with their students, without distractions. They also took time for reflection and purposefully associated with educators of a similar mind-set. In today's society, where personal well-being and stress management are topical issues, this study provides supporting evidence that competencies associated with strong emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) also contribute to maintaining a life-work balance and personal well-being.

Furthermore, in this study, support was identified as being essential to teacher sustainment. For the early childhood educators involved in this investigation, having another adult to assist in daily duties, a feature of Australian early childhood settings, proved to be a key contributor to their sustainment. In contrast, however, this study indicated that line-managers and educational bodies appear to provide early childhood teachers with little leadership or support in coping with the daily demands of their work. This may be due to the dichotomy that exists in some schools between primary and early childhood sectors. Alternatively, some line managers, typically primary school principals, may lack confidence in offering support and guidance in an area in which they perceive to have limited knowledge or expertise. This finding further confirms previous research into primary principal's perceptions of their leadership role in early childhood education (Stamopoulos, 1998).

Teacher character and disposition also appear to influence early childhood teachers' ability to cope with the demands of their work and their continuance in teaching, findings supported in research on teacher stress and burnout (Friedman, 2000; Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999; Wilhelm et al., 2000). With reports indicating that attrition rates amongst novice teachers are high, the question arises: are people suited to teaching entering the profession? The option of screening pre-service teachers as to their possessing the desired qualities and dispositions, as well as realistic expectations, is an area requiring further scrutiny if future teachers are to be sustained in such a demanding profession.

This study also revealed the fluctuating nature of early childhood teachers' professional lives, a finding in contrast to previous studies where teachers' professional career paths are considered to be more lineal in nature (Huberman, 1993; Katz, 1972). For the participants in this study, the vast majority being female (97%), sustainment of professional commitment was more aligned to possessing strong beliefs in early childhood pedagogical practice than to the extension of their teaching role beyond the classroom. Sustaining active engagement in the profession was dependant on participants' ability to balance personal and professional commitments in order to maintain personal well-being and a life-work balance. Given the changing demographics of the teaching profession, including factors such as the ageing, feminization and late entry of many teachers into the profession, further investigation of teachers' professional career paths and how these evolve is warranted.

In summary, for the individual teacher, sustainment in teaching and in the profession appears to be a matter of attitude, balance and effort. The ability to maintain a high level of commitment and engagement in the profession over an extended period of time seems unrealistic. Sustainment in teaching relies on teachers possessing the emotional maturity to take into consideration all those factors that impact on their personal and professional lives, then strive for a life-work balance.

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